

ELIJAH POAGE AND HIS MILL

The Poage Family Built A Community When Roanoke Was Still The Great Lick Crossroad

Talk about environmental impact statements.

Elijah Poage was 24 years old in 1845—just 40 years after Roanoke County had been founded from the western part of Augusta County—when he appeared at the Salem Court house to apply for possession of one of 12 lots in town. He owned land on both sides of Back Creek, he said, and he wanted to operate a grist and sawmill.

The Court ordered that a writ of *Ad Quod Damnum* ("To What Damage") be issued, directing the Roanoke County Sheriff to "take care and inquire if 12 fit persons" who were injured or lost space to the land to "judge in the best of their skill and ability, how a dam will better be prepared there, whether the property of others

will be damaged" up toward Bent Mountain along U.S. 221 as taking place on land that was once the site of Indian footpaths. Later, the Poage family established a mill and several other businesses. The history of the Back Creek area provides a fascinating look of the valley's early development.

BY
HELEN BARRANGER

might be damaged."

The judges were also to determine whether and on what degree, "lots of persons and ordinary navigators" might be restricted, whether such obstructions could be prevented, and whether the health of Poage's neighbors would be "injured" by the operation of the mill.

Maybe that's where the Army Corps of Engineers got its tone.

In June of 1848, the Court ordered that Elijah Poage "have leave to build the said dam and mill."

So begins a town where County consciousness in the valley at the base of Mount Zion where a mill race is today seen through Poage's Mill in being gone.

Each level built a mile apart, the dam site, in a big cove that had been built in



A gravel mill in the Back Creek area. The mill was built in the 1840s and is the first point of the Back Creek area through the end of the 19th century. And today you can see the mill in the area.

he appeared at the Salem Courthouse to apply for permission to erect a 12-foot dam. He owned land on both sides of Back Creek, he said, and he wanted to operate a grist and sawmill.

The Court ordered that a writ of *Ad Quod Damnum* ("To What Damage") be issued, directing the Roanoke County Sheriff to "summon and impannel 12 fit persons" who were impartial to meet upon the land to "judge to the best of their skill and ability, from above and below the proposed dam, whether the property of others

recorded mill transactions, sale of meat, what took place in his morning and coffee business, olices with notations giving age of the deceased and cause of death. Unusually, he left a valuable social commentary about the lives and times of 18th century residents of Rowan County. Examples:

1860 Aug. 6 — To Chapman T. Hourley, To coffin for child age 7 mos. \$3.50
Oct. 2 — Jacob Shaver Dr. (invoice) no E. Poage To 1 coffin for child, aged 2 years. Died with Scarlatine Fever \$5.75

1861 July 16 — To Joshua Nabors, Coffin for his little son aged 3 years. Died from Fluxe and worms \$4.00

July 14 — Coffin for little daughter, aged 5 years. Same disease as brother \$4.25

A quart of branly brought in 25 cents, a bushel of corn, 75 cents. Recorded in \$4.50 charged "To season a mare;" the sum paid out for "19 days work at 75 cents a day."

Poage never owned slaves; there were black families in the neighborhood who hired out by the day.

Inserted in the front of Gregon's journal is a section from another book that sets forth tables of measurement of all kinds, even including apothecary weights. There are pages and pages of "Application of Problems," handwritten in careful, decorative script.

Bill Joyce, a Back Creek resident who collects stories and history of Back Creek families, thinks it is part of a book of instruction, quite possibly passed down to Elijah through several generations, for the monetary units are in British pounds (£), shillings (s) and pence (d). The problems are practical, concerning such things as lines, coffee, and land. Examples:

A man sold 7 cords of muslin for 31.9s

years, tall, slender and bearded. He was born in Backhridge County in 1823, coming to Back Creek as a young man. When he was 14 his father died.

It is not recorded where he went to school or for how long. He had a bright mind, was quick to recognize an opportunity and seize it. He had special gifts for mathematics and record-keeping; aptitudes for fine craftsmanship; mechanical abilities; an enterprising, entrepreneurial spirit. From dawn until dusk an ambition to excel drove him to hard work that would have finished off a lesser man.

"Everyone said he was a wonderful person," Gregon says. "If he had any faults, I never heard of them."

Most of Elijah's traits and characteristics must have come to him honestly through the genes and family living patterns of his forebears.

Poages are well documented in Virginia history. E.B. Kegley, in his 1938 "Virginia Frontiers," writes: "Poage families are closely identified with every advance made by Virginia's western frontier."

In 1793, Robert Poage and his wife Elizabeth Preston Poage, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, emigrated with nine children from Ireland to Augusta County. Robert sold the land upon which the Augustin Stone Church was built at Fort Delaware near Staunton.

In the 1750s the church ordered a silver communion set from England. After months of waiting for it to be crafted, shipped across the Atlantic, then transported overland from Newcastle, Del., it finally arrived—an exquisitely made group of three pitchers, three plates, six goblets, each with its own stand. The church officers looked at the invoice in dismay; they were shocked. The group could afford such expense. The group met and decided it must be returned.

Elijah and Mary had been known for in the 19th century. Miss Mollie ran a sort of hotel and resort after the turn of the century. It began when young cousins who worked in town would come out for the weekend, bringing friends. The reputation for pleasant country living spread until folks came from all over the east to spare dance to music from a player piano, play croquet on the lawn, take moonlight strolls, but mainly to partake of Miss Mollie's wonderful country cooking.

"Grandma always had pie," says Mary Poage Gregson. "She would bake four or five at a time in a big stone outdoor Dutch

Southwest Virginia. Eventually he moved to Back Creek.

Several early Poages were justices of the peace, bearing the title of squire. They were road commissioners and surveyors. Joan Poage, a son of Robert and father of Elijah, was elected to the assembly in 1777. The Poages have always been well connected. Colonel Robert Brackinridge married Mary Poage; General Andrew Lewis married Martha. In modern times, the mother of former Sixth District Congressman Caldwell Butler was a Poage.

At the age of 44, in 1867, Elijah married Mary M. Sloan, a woman from the community. About that time he was elected a justice of the peace for the Cave Spring District; thereafter he was called Squire Poage. He was continuously re-elected as long as he lived.

Elijah donated land along the present Route 221 for a school or a church, the land where Poage's Mill Brethren Church

and fed houseguests, reared seven children. He wove carpets for every room in the house, tended a big garden while she wore her silk bonnet.

"She would put on a big kettle of beans and then go to the garden and hoe a row or two while the beans cooked," says Gregson.

Miss Mollie milked eight cows, choused better, raised chickens, canned fat, the winter, made and mended clothes, even kept 16 or 18 pees, one named Lucy who was about 20 years old. She shopped in Roanoke for the few things she could not grow or make.

wingons; 13 stanzas of bees; 1,000 pounds of bacon; 20 coffins; 6,000 feet of walnut, cherry, pine, poplar and oak lumber; household and kitchen furniture.

Exactly when the mill ceased to operate is uncertain. A Mr. Sincer leased it briefly. Then George Hunt let his brother-in-law run the mill and stone under the name Obrediah Hunt & Sons.

"My mother came to Back Creek in 1906 to teach and it was not running then," says Gregson. "I remember the night the dam broke, about 1918 or 20. There was a heavy electrical storm that took out the swinging bridge. Back Creek came up over the road."

Gradually the mill building and wheel sank into decay. Vandals took their toll.

In the family cemetery, designated a historic landmark, Elijah and Mary are buried high on a hill overlooking their lands. Nearby are the graves of his parents. Sometimes along the way, Elijah set the